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Reflecting Divine Light: *al-Khidr* as an Embodiment of God's Mercy (*raḥma*)

Irfan A. Omar

Bernard McGinn, who wrote extensively on aspects of Christian mysticism acknowledged that to define mysticism is a problematic task. Mysticism is a controversial dimension of religious practice and thus may be seen through the lens of a variety of categories or frameworks rather than a single one. Thus he notes three general ways of viewing mysticism. Firstly, as part of religion; secondly, as a way of life; and, thirdly, as a process of communicating the inner experience of the presence of the divine.¹ The subject of this essay may be located primarily in Islamic mystical thought, or more appropriately in Sufi writings. In as much as *al-Khidr* (*Khidr*) lies within the realm of Sufism, it would be apt to say that he has been received in all the three different ways within the Islamicate tradition.² *Khidr* has been viewed as one who is at once connected to the Quranic text, the exegesis, the *hadith* (the prophetic tradition), the *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (stories of prophets), massive Sufi literature, as well as various folk traditions, many of which remain fluid and ever changing. The *Khidr* phenomenon and its associated traditions have taken up such a huge space within the Islamicate traditions and cultures that it is impossible to do justice to this topic in such a short essay. Therefore, here I will primarily focus on the religious/mystical understanding of *Khidr*'s role and how it may be connected with the symbolism of "light" and spiritual or inward "illumination" which many Sufis claim to have received through him.³

1 Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, Vol. 1, New York 1991, xvff.

2 Islamicate is a comprehensive term that embraces the variety and richness of Islam and Muslim civilizations generated since the rise of Muslim empires in the eight century. The term was first introduced by the noted scholar of Islam, Professor Marshall Hodgson. He viewed it as something referring not only to the religion of Islam but also and perhaps more importantly "...to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims." Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in World Civilization*, Vol. 1, Chicago 1974, 59.

3 This is not to be equated with illumination of the mind alone but rather with a kind of spiritual realization that is more inclusive of one's totality of being. In religious discourse this occurs as a result of piety on the part of the seeker and imparting of grace on the part of God.

I. *Khidr*: Origins and Meanings

Khidr is the legendary figure mentioned in the Qur'an in *Surat al-Kahf* (18:60–82). These verses primarily deal with an allegorical story about Moses – who is recognized as an influential and important prophet in the Qur'an – and a mysterious spiritual person, later identified with Khidr. The main thrust of the Quranic story is that the scope of knowledge is so vast that no one besides God may ever be able to acquire even a minute portion of it. There are individuals to whom God has given some of this knowledge and prophets such as Moses, Jesus and Muhammad are certainly considered among these individuals. However, God also gives from his knowledge to those who have traversed the spiritual path (*ṭarīqah*) – these are the so-called “friends of God” (*awliyā*, sing. *walī*) or the saints, who are given *ma'ārifah* (knowledge of God or of the spiritual, hence “hidden” world, *al-ʿālam al-ghayb*). They have received this knowledge because of their exceptional rigor and piety and because God grants knowledge and wisdom “to whomever He will.”⁴ One such person is Khidr who is known in the Qur'an only as “one of Our [i.e. God's] servants – a man to whom We had granted Our Mercy and whom We had given knowledge of Our own.”⁵ The supreme symbolism of the Moses-Khidr story is that divine knowledge may be received in the form of “law” or revelation (as Moses did) or as mystical, intuitive knowledge (as was given to Khidr). These two forms of knowledge are complementary and neither is above the other; hence Moses' journey in search of this servant of God (Khidr) so he can learn something in addition to the knowledge he already received from God as a prophet.⁶

The name “al-Khidr” is given to him by the early interpreters of the Qur'an (*mufasssirūn*) who thought of him as a person who by his very presence revives, regenerates, and makes things green, hence the Arabic, al-Khidr, which means the “Green One”. Although this quality of “greening” or making things come “alive” remains at the center of his identity, in different parts of the Islamic world, Khidr is also known as Khwajah Khizir, Pir Badar, Raja Kidar, Abul Abbas, and Hang Tuah which relate to Khidr's multiple roles as a guide, teacher, and even as a “savior” of sort and who is venerated widely as a saint.⁷ From the very beginning Khidr was seen as someone who could not be contained within a single tradition or be confined to a single region in terms of his popular manifestations. In the flowering of the

4 Qur'an 2:269a, translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A new translation*, Oxford 2004, 31.

5 Qur'an 18:65, *ibid.*, 187.

6 Irfan A. Omar, “Khidr in the Islamic Tradition”, *The Muslim World* 83 (1993), 279–94. For a succinct account of Moses' meeting with Khidr and their interaction see Anthony H. Johns, “Moses in the Qur'an: Finite and Infinite Dimensions of Prophecy,” in: Robert B. Crotty (ed.), *The Charles Strong Lectures 1972–1984*, Leiden 1987.

7 Some of these names are attempts to link Khidr with a particular era and place; others such as “Khwajah,” “Pir,” and “Raja” are honorific titles that show an elevated status in spiritual and mythical receptions of Khidr.

Islamic civilization he quite literally became part of many cultures and traditions simultaneously. After all, he is by profession a wanderer – always on the move – and much like Elijah of the Biblical tradition, seeking to help those in distress and those in need of advice. Khidr is said to appear in “green” or even in a “white” cloak. In *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* we find a report of the Prophet: “He was named al-Khidr because he sat upon barren land and when he did, it became green with vegetation.”⁸ The greening of a patch of barren land (*farwa*) referred to by several early Muslim scholars implies making the land fertile and in its allegorical sense may also mean rejuvenation of the human spirit, something which Khidr came to be identified with in later traditions. In the present context one might ask, “what nationality does Khidr belong to?” or “what is his ethnic identity?” and “where does he live?” “does he still exist,” and so on. However, these are questions that cannot be dealt with in any literal sense, because Khidr belongs to that category of Islamic/religious literature which is known as the “imaginal” or that which pertains to the world of images (*mundus imaginalis*).⁹ Of course, these questions would be considered absurd in the realm of rational assessments of the story of Khidr where it may be viewed as a mere myth. It is futile to seek verification of such stories; however asking such questions may help us understand the various dimensions of the Khidr tradition which has played a major role in Muslim social, cultural, and spiritual life for many centuries. In a postmodern understanding, Khidr perhaps has no particular nationality or ethnicity; he is neither old nor young. We can even say that he continues to “exist” – even as irrational as it may sound – because countless people claim to have “known” him and have had some form of interaction with him.

Nevertheless, early *tafsīr* literature (exegesis) provides a variety of answers to the kinds of questions raised above. An enormous wealth of details pertaining to his name, genealogy, appearances, origins and status is found there. For example, al-Baghdadi (d. 1324) in his work *Tafsīr al-khāzin* reports that Khidr’s real name was “Baliya bin Malkan,” while al-Nawawi refers to him as “Abul Abbas” which he says was his nick name.¹⁰ According to Tha’labi (d. 1036), he lives on an island from

8 See *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, hadith no: IV.23.614. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, named after its compiler, is one of the most authoritative hadith collections; Muslims regard it as one of the foremost textual resources in interpreting the Qur’an.

9 In Sufi cosmology there is a so-called “world of images” (*‘ālam al-amthāl*) which lies in between (as the *ishmus*, or *barzakh*) the other two spheres of “existence” as it were, the “world of spirits” (*‘ālam al-rūh*) and the “world of matter” (*‘ālam al-khalq*). The world of images plays an important role in connecting the other two in that it allows ordinary yet pious human beings to possess the ability (by the leave of God) to perform or witness miraculous things. Those who are advanced in their journey on the path to God (*tarīqah*), God may enable them to have such powers. Stories of meeting with Khidr and other “miraculous acts” are generally explained to have been taking place in the imaginal realm – or the world of images. This may be compared to “dream imagery.” An example of one such claim is made by Ibn ‘Arabi, who experienced several miraculous appearances of Khidr.

10 See ‘Ala al-dīn al-Baghdadi, *Tafsīr al-khāzin*: Lubāb al ta’wīl fī ma’an al-tanzīl, Beirut n.d., 205; Ahmad Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *Al-Zahr al-Nadīr fī nabā al-Khaḍir*, Beirut 1988, 25.

which he protects sailors; he is the guardian of the sea, etc.¹¹ Others have suggested places such as the Nile delta and other such places where two bodies of water converge. Other places where Khidr is discussed extensively are the historical sources, where various narratives of the story are found. These are Muhammad Jarir al-Tabari's *al-Tarikh*; the hagiographical literature known as the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*; Sufi literature and the biographies of Sufis which are often filled with reports of their meeting with Khidr; and, finally in a variety of folk literature in various languages. As far as accounts of meeting with Khidr are concerned, we have numerous reports by Sufis, scholars, and even non-Muslims who have come in contact with the Islamicate cultures. Carl Jung, the influential psychiatrist and author, wrote in his autobiography that he dreamt of Khidr several times and then goes on to elaborate the symbolism of these dream images connecting them to other events in his life. Jung in fact made significant use of the figure of Khidr in his writings and identified him as one of the archetypes.¹² He also used the Khidr-Moses parable to teach his patients the "importance of accepting paradoxes."¹³ There are countless others throughout Muslim history who consider Khidr to be "alive" and stories of him appearing to people are given as evidence of such claims. Among the many personal accounts of meetings with Khidr, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), the famous Spanish Sufi may have left one of the most intricate reports concerning his meeting the mysterious saint. Ibn 'Arabi writes that while he was on the port of Tunis, Khidr appeared to him as if coming from over the water but he was not wet, and then he proceeded towards a distant light house reaching it while taking only a few steps.¹⁴ Ibn 'Arabi also wrote of praying with Khidr.¹⁵

Generally, in Islamic religious literature, Khidr is seen as *walī*, (saint) as well as a *nabī* (prophet), although there is a considerable difference of opinion about this in official Islam. Many scholars and exegetes throughout Muslim history regarded Khidr as prophet since he seemed to fulfill the criteria for being one; that is, he has received knowledge from God and has been referred to as a "mercy" from God. Others questioned whether the modality of knowledge and its purpose can be considered equivalent to that given to prophet Moses since Moses was also a bearer of divine law (*rasūl*).¹⁶ These scholars would be more comfortable accepting Khidr as

11 Abu Ishaq Ahmad al-Tha'labi, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā' al-musammā 'Arā'is al-majālis*, Beirut n.d., 197.

12 Carl Gustav Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster*, translation by R.F.C. Hull, London 2003.

13 Mohammed Shallah, *Some Parallels between Sufi Practices and the Path of Individuation*, in: J. Marvin Spiegelman, et. al. (eds.) *Sufism, Islam and Jungian Psychology*, Scottsdale/AZ 1991, 91.

14 Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, *Al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyah*, Cairo 1911; rep. Beirut n.d., Vol. 1, 86.

15 Peter L. Wilson, *The Green Man: The Trickster Figure in Sufism*, Gnosis, Spring 1991, 23.

16 See Omar, *Khidr in the Islamic Tradition*, 284–86. While the debate over whether Khidr was a prophet or not continued for centuries, Reynold A. Nicholson in his *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: 1921) brought an additional nuance to bear on this discussion. He argued that perhaps the kind of prophecy Khidr held was that of "sainthood" or (*nubuwwatu'l wilāya*)

an important saint but not as a prophet.¹⁷ Contemporary orthodox religious understandings of Khidr seldom venture beyond the literal interpretation of the verses in question. In contrast, the mystical and popular views of Khidr are often embellished by allegorical and metaphorical interpretations. One might say the former is primarily concerned with an "Islamic" view of Khidr, while the latter would most certainly fall under the purview of the Islamicate tradition. Therefore, when it is noted that Khidr, from the start seemed larger than life figure who could not be contained within one religious tradition, it also alludes to the fact that before assuming an Islamicate persona, some aspects of the character which embodies Khidr existed in different forms and was known by different names. Similarly as a result of Islam's influence, other pre-Islamic legends adopted variations of his name substituting it with existing figures in those legends. Thus as the Khidr's Quranic narrative Islamizes some pre-Islamic ideas; these same ideas were recycled in older legends adding newer elements to them. For example, in some Indian legends the patron of sailors is known as "Khwajah Khizr," even though these legends have existed long before Islam came onto the scene. There the name, "Khwaja Khizr," appears to be a later substitution for an earlier figure that fulfilled the role of a guide and protector deity for the sailors of that region.¹⁸

The earliest scholarly discussions of Khidr trace the Quranic narrative to three sources: the Alexandar romance, the epic of Gilgamesh, and the story of the wandering Elijah.

Since becoming part of the Islamicate tradition, Khidr legend has assumed numerous manifestations and as a result continues to grow. The story of Khidr has played a particularly important role in folklore and popular mysticism as they developed in several Muslim societies. As a mystical figure, Khidr has had an enormous impact on various dimensions of Sufi thought and practice. Among some prominent Sufis he is regarded as the spiritual teacher who continues to guide those who do not have an earthly teacher.¹⁹ As noted above, my focus in this paper is on religious and

whereas that of Moses' status as a prophet and a lawgiver was that of "institution" (*nubuwwa-tu'l tashrī*).

17 Some modern Qur'an interpreters have a more radical reassessment of the Quranic verse that is regarded as referring to Khidr. There is however, a general consensus amongst most classical scholars regarding the verse in question (18:65: "... one of Our [i.e. God's] servants – a man to whom We had granted Our Mercy...") that the "servant" mentioned is the same person later identified in the hadith as Khidr. These modern writers, most notably, Sayyid Qutb, argue that the "servant" mentioned in 18:65 should not be identified as Khidr since there is no Quranic evidence. See Sayyid Qutb, English translation by Adil Salahi, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, Fi Zilāl al-Qur'an, Vol. 11, London 2007.

18 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Khwājā Khadr and the Fountain of Life in the Tradition of Persian and Mughal Art*, in: *Ars Islamica* 1 (1994), 173; cf. Irfan A. Omar *The Symbol of Immortality: Some Popular Images of Khidr in the Orient*, in: *Islamic Culture* 74 (2000), 33–51.

19 The central Asian Sufism contains a group known as Uwaysis, named after a contemporary of Prophet Muhammad who converted to Islam without ever meeting him thus establishing a model of following a teacher who is distant or invisible yet present and available to the followers. Uwaysis regard Khidr as their guide as a "hidden" master. Annemarie Schimmel, *And Mu-*

mystical understandings of the symbolism represented by Khidr. I will not address the role Khidr plays in popular piety and mythic folklore. Here I am particularly interested in one consideration of Khidr's story, namely, "how does Khidr's 'presence' constitute an act of mercy on the part of God?" and, following this lead I ask, "what does this presence and his being a symbol of divine compassion say about the characteristics endowed within the figure of Khidr with respect to the motif of light and spiritual illumination?"

II. *Khidr*: A Symbol of Mercy from God

Khidr symbolizes divine mercy (*rahma*) here on earth which is dispensed through his presence and actions. The Qur'an describes Khidr as one of God's special servants to whom God had given both his mercy and his knowledge.²⁰ Since Khidr is seen as a "repository" of divine knowledge on earth, he is seen as playing a role of a mediator between God and human beings who are on the path and seek divine proximity (*qurb*). However, Khidr is a recipient of God's mercy in the same breath as he is a recipient of God's knowledge; here mercy and knowledge are synonymous. Furthermore, both God's mercy and his knowledge are meant for all servants of God, in essence for all of creation. Khidr here becomes part of a chain through which *rahma* of God reaches a worshipper and a seeker of *qurb*.²¹ The notion of *rahma* appears many times in the Qur'an. For example, Q. 43:32 speaks of God's prophets as "... the ones who share out ... Lord's grace" as against the wealthy and powerful who might be more inclined to misuse their power to maintain their wealth. Thus the role of the prophets is deemed to be that of being "protectors" of the masses and in full accordance with and to realize God's will on earth. The prophets dispense mercy because God has granted them certain powers, charisma, resources and so on to do so. Thus, in Islamic worldview all prophets and messengers are viewed as symbols of God's mercy; they are guides to the path to God; they are also known to announce warning of the impending wrath of God for those who cause *fitna* (anarchy and social unrest). Being the bearers of the knowledge of and from God, they represent God's concern for the creation. God is most often invoked as "most merciful" (*Al-Rahmān*) and "most compassionate" (*Al-Rahīm*). The Quranic usage of the term *rahma* referring to Khidr's knowledge, as granted by God, resonates with other appearances of that term in the Qur'an. Besides Q. 43:32 it may be noted that in Q. 21:107, the Qur'an, while referring to Prophet Muhammad says, "It was only as a mercy that We sent you [Prophet] to all people" (*rahmat al-'il*

hammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety, Chapel Hill 1985, 22.

²⁰ Paraphrasing Q. 18:65.

²¹ Of course, this also raises a number of theological questions as to the viability of the notion of a mediator in orthodox Islam which would fall outside of the scope of the present study.

'*ālamīn*).²² Here again the usage of the term *rahma* denotes the sending of prophets as "mercy" from God. Quranic verse 18:65b thus points to the fact that this symbol of mercy, i.e. Khidr, is as such because he is given certain knowledge, knowledge from God. These two ideas converge in this verse enabling one to deduce that Khidr has an elevated status in the Qur'an, that of being a prophet who, by virtue of being endowed with divine knowledge, is a representative of the mercy of God.²³ Furthermore, to possess divine knowledge is a quality that is often also claimed by saints (*awliyā*). Khidr is thus both a prophet and a saint as has been identified by numerous persons who have "encountered" Khidr as well as scholars.

I have argued that Khidr is an embodiment of God's mercy because of the knowledge he has been given by God. This is how he is viewed in terms of his role and function in Muslim cultures as well as depicted by the scholars and commentators of the Qur'an. This allows one to speak about the probability of an intimate link between Khidr's knowledge and his charisma, i.e. between his divine mandate and his ability to perform "miraculous" and "magical" acts of healing for the sick and to provide guidance for those who have lost their way. It is these acts or the believability of Khidr's ability to perform such acts which have transformed him into a popular figure among the masses and made him a sought out teacher by the Sufis and the like. Here I am also suggesting that Khidr's role as a depository of divine knowledge makes him a person who reflects divine light (*al-nūr*) in the metaphoric sense of light as the source of spiritual countenance (*jalāl* or *tajallī*). Such interpretation of Khidr is primarily to be found in Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, where Khidr lends himself to a host of allegorical roles. Below I will address some of the textual and historical connections that may be considered in support of this thesis.

III. Gnosis as Light

Khidr is someone who is said to possess gnosis, the one on whom God had bestowed mercy and given knowledge from God (Q. 18:65). Gnosis is defined in the following words. "If gnosis were to take visible shape, all who looked thereon would die at the sight of its beauty and loveliness and goodness and grace, and every brightness would become dark beside the splendour thereof."²⁴ This idea of distinguishing between worldly brightness and divine splendor makes it plain that there is a kind of illumination of the soul which happens as a result of becoming a recipient of divine knowledge. This notion of "inward illumination" is found in many religious traditions from Indic to Western religions. Islamic mystical discourse is no exception and one can find the term in many Muslim mystical accounts from early in the ninth century. Illumination (*kashf* or unveiling) of the mysteries of '*ālam al-ghayb*' has

22 Translation by Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A new translation*, 317, 208.

23 For a general treatment of this issue, see Omar, *Khidr in the Islamic Tradition*, 279–291.

24 An unnamed mystic quoted in Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, London 1989, 7.

been sought by mystics from all walks of life and was promoted by individual Sufis as well as some schools of Sufi practice since the 9th century. One of the schools which deals with the theme of "light" and illumination, having to do with *ma'ārifah* or spiritual knowledge, is known as al-Ishraqiyyah, the philosophy of illumination, which was founded by Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi (d. 1191).²⁵ In the words of Henry Corbin, the foremost commentator on Islamic mystical traditions in the West, Suhrawardi was seminal in bringing out the "oriental" dimension of Islamic wisdom – a dimension without which, by implication, the western or semitic aspects of Islam would remain incomplete. What Corbin means is that Suhrawardi among others sought to maintain the unity of philosophy and mystical experience, which would not be the case in the West.²⁶ At the same time Corbin identifies the extra-Islamic elements within the "theosophy of Light" (*hikmat al-Ishrāq*) related to ancient Persian ideas prevalent prior to Islam. Nevertheless, the "light-infused ontology"²⁷ of the Suhrawardi seemed to have influenced a number of major Muslim thinkers who in turn opened new frontiers for perceiving the notion of light in Islamic mystical discourse.

The notion of divine knowledge as "light" and its symbolic meanings arose as a result of trying to interpret the so called "Light verse" which appears in the Qur'an 24:35 (*Surat al-Nūr*) where it speaks of a "lamp" which reflects divine light:

God is the Light of the heavens and earth. His Light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass, a glass like a glittering star, fuelled from a blessed olive tree from neither east nor west, whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it – light upon light. God guides whomever He will to his Light; God draws such comparisons for people; God has full knowledge of everything.²⁸

Taking their cue from this allegorical narrative many mystical interpreters of the Qur'an theorized about the symbolism of the lamp and its light. The expression "mystical lamp" became extremely popular in Sufism and was understood as an "illuminating device" that gives the Sufi his/her enigmatic and extraordinary status compared with other human beings. The idea of a lamp lit with the "blazing fire" of divine love symbolizes higher station (*maqām*) held by individuals as a result of their knowledge and wisdom. The "lamp" is said to reside at the core of this person's being (*al-qalb*) which is where one connects with God as it were. Among the many Sufis, al-Ghazali (d. 1111) wrote a famous treatise (*Mishkāt al-anwār*) about the mystical lamp that "burns in his heart" and warms his soul.²⁹ For al-Ghazali, the

25 J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, with a new foreword by John Voll, New York and Oxford 1998, 140–41.

26 Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn 'Arabī*, Princeton/NJ 1969, 20–21.

27 Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Cosmology*, London and New York 1989, 157.

28 Translation by Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A new translation*, 223.

29 M. Asín Palacios, *La Espiritualidad de Algazel y su sentido cristiano*, Madrid 1934–41, 371.

lamp signifies the archetypes or most beautiful names of God.³⁰ Numerous other references to the lamp are to be found in mystical writings.³¹ Another famous Muslim mystic Ibn 'Arabi, mentioned above considers "niche" (*mishkāṭ*) as an outer cloak of the heart to protect from passions (*ahwā'*); the glass within it represents the heart even as it is transparent allowing the light to shine through because it (the heart) has attained the level of purity and has been enabled to reflect divine radiance.³² Ibn 'Arabi regards the "lights" (*anwār*, sing. *nūr*) as the "Divine Sayings which appear in the 'niche' of the Prophet [Muhammad], who manifests the glory and beauty of these lights exactly as they are in reality."³³ The light motif is used in a variety of ways in the Islamic tradition. Many scholars and mystics have alluded to the notion of light as an allegory for mystical insight and as a precursor to religious experience. Ibn 'Arabi has an interesting anecdote which seems to represent such an experience. He reports that in 1198 C.E. as he prayed in Azhar mosque, located in the city of Fez, he had an extraordinary experience:

I saw a light that seemed to illuminate what was before me, despite the fact that I had lost all sense of front and back, it being as if I had no back at all. Indeed during this vision I had no sense of direction whatever, my sense of vision being, so to speak, spherical in its scope, I recognized my spatial position only as hypothesis, not as reality.³⁴

Ibn 'Arabi by relating this experience claimed to have reached what he calls "the Station of Light."³⁵ In this vision of reality, for Ibn 'Arabi at least, the "normal coordinates of space and time are suspended and become mere hypothetical."³⁶ What is at stake here is the very idea of how we understand reality. Ibn 'Arabi asserts that human beings exist at the crossroads of two kinds of reality: one that is not really a reality as such – this worldly reality; and the other, a reality that connects human beings, and them alone, to God. This dimension is part of the spiritual "inheritance" from God given to human beings who are God's vicegerents (Q. 2:30).

30 Q. 7:180; Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Mishkāṭ Al-anwār: The Niche for Lights*, translation by W.H.T. Gairdner, London 1924.

31 For example: "When God kindles that lamp in the heart of His servant, it burns fiercely in the crevices of his heart [and] he is lighted by it", in A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, Mineola/NY 2002, 50; and "...while the inner lamp of jewels is still alight, hasten to trim its wick and provide it with oil," in Idries Shah, *The Sufis*, New York 1990, 146.

32 Ibn 'Arabi, *Futūḥāt al-makkiyah*, Vol. 1, 434.

33 Muḥyiddīn Ibn 'Arabi, *Divine Sayings: Mishkāṭ al-anwār*, trans. Stephen Hirtenstein and Martin Notcutt, Oxford 2005, 12.

34 Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, *Sufis of Andalusia: 'Rūḥ al-quḍ's' and 'al-Durrah al-fākhira'* of Ibn 'Arabi, trans. with introduction and notes by R.W.J. Austin, London 1971, 30.

35 Stephen Hirtenstein and Michael Tiernan (eds.), *Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi: A Commemorative Volume*, Shaftesbury 1993, 55. Cf. Adam Dupre and Peter Young (eds.) *The Life and Influence of Ibn 'Arabi*, Proceedings of the First Annual Symposium of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, Durham University, April 1984.

36 Peter Coates, *Ibn 'Arabi and Modern Thought*, Oxford 2002, 164.

Whether human beings are able to visualize, actualize, and realize this inheritance within their lifetime or not is another matter. Light for Ibn 'Arabi is "synonymous with knowledge of God and knowledge of the Unity of Being."³⁷ In many of his writings, Ibn 'Arabi speaks of "those illuminated ones" referring to other Sufi masters and *awliyā* (plural of *walī* – saint). He also believed that the *qalb* (spiritual heart or intellect which the Sufis identify as the organ that lies at the core of one's being) is the place where God dwells and the seeker should "illumine it with the lamps of the celestial and divine virtues ..."³⁸ Similarly, al-Ghazali in his *Ihyā 'ulūm al-dīn* (*Revival of the religious sciences*) speaks of those whom the uncreated light illumines with its brilliance.³⁹ Al-Ghazali also has his own "highly developed light metaphysics" where he identifies illumination as the third degree of *tawhīd*.⁴⁰ This light motif is also expressed in terms of veils and the separation through them between divine reality and the world of matter. Thus we find a description within Sufi thought of the path from darkness to light which involves "seventy-thousand veils" and at least half of these are said to be the "veils of light."⁴¹ The goal of the seeker is to become "refined" by going through each of these veils until the seeker (*sālik*) has attained the freedom from the "taint of darkness" and "the freedom of light from darkness means the self-consciousness of light as light."⁴² The unveiling of each of these invisible barriers is equivalent to illuminating the spiritual self to a degree which was otherwise experiencing darkness, which equals ignorance.

The connection between light and gnosis is made by numerous Muslim thinkers and mystics. The light is also seen as the light of certainty (*al-yaqīn*). Without this light one remains in the state of ambiguity insofar as one's faith is concerned. Thus, *nūr* within a believer's heart (*al-qalb*) allows him/her to "see" what is not visible to the naked eye. Hence a believer who is endowed with "light" of certainty is said to have attained the *r'uyāt al qalb* (visitation of the heart) and through which the believer is endowed with extraordinary powers of discernment (*firāsah*). Thus notions such as inward illumination and spiritual light (*al-nūr*) can be said to represent the divine knowledge and the wisdom that accompanies such knowledge.⁴³

37 Ibid. 133.

38 M. Asín Palacios, *El-Islam cristianizado*, Madrid ²1981 [1931], 423.

39 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Ihyā 'ulūm al-dīn*, Delhi 1933.

40 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill 1975, 96.

41 Attributed to W.H.T. Gairdner in Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, 15–16.

42 Muhammad Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia: A Contribution to the History of Muslim Philosophy*, Whitefish/MT 2005, 116.

43 Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, 51.

IV. *Khidr's Knowledge as a Conduit for Experiencing Divine Light (al-Nūr)*

In his work on the symbolism of the role played by Khidr, Patrick Franke speaks of the idea of "sacralization of spaces in the traditional world of Islam"⁴⁴ as well as about the notion of "encountering Khidr."⁴⁵ This latter work deals with accounts of the Sufis' meetings with Khidr which allowed them to claim special spiritual status and confirmed their being on a mystical path. This is a process which I regard as the 'sacralization of being' or of experience in the sense that it is through an encounter with Khidr that many have come to be regarded as saints. Meeting with Khidr somehow became the norm in the Sufi experience and Franke has collected some accounts by Sufis who claim to have met Khidr and have thus gained what is variously called mystical insights, secret knowledge, divine mysteries, and so on.⁴⁶ This shows two things simultaneously. First, it shows that Khidr's high spiritual status allowed the mystically inclined to gain a spiritual status within their own contexts and for their own purposes, be they interested in pursuit of divine proximity or in asserting their right as inheritors of spiritual authority and attaining the role of a Sufi master. The first denotes a purely spiritual quest and the second perhaps a more politically tainted quest for power and control of an institution or group. As Franke notes, Khidr was almost always "instrumentalized as a symbol of religious authorization."⁴⁷ Second, by the very nature of such accounts and their proliferation, Khidr gains universal appeal and his veneration grows steadily. This explains the wide dissemination of the Khidr legend in the predominantly Muslim regions. Franke attests to the fact that his collection of Sufi accounts of meeting with Khidr allowed him to map out the "general historical phenomenology of the veneration of this figure within the Islamic world."⁴⁸

Just as Khidr has been used to transform profane space into a sacred one (this is what Franke's work tries to show) it can be noted that the Khidr symbol has also been used to transform individuals – according to Sufis, their souls – journeying from the inner darkness of ignorance to attaining knowledge of and proximity with God and thus achieving the station of light. If we apply this analysis to the story of Khidr, two aspects of Khidr's being seem to converge: a manifestation of God's

44 Patrick Franke, *Khidr in Istanbul: Observations on the Symbolic Construction of Sacred Spaces in Traditional Islam*, in: *On Archeology of Sainthood and Local Spirituality in Islam: Past and Present Crossroads of Events and Ideas*, Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam, ed. Georg Stauth, Bielefeld 2004, 45.

45 Patrick Franke's doctoral dissertation which he later published as *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären im traditionellen Islam*, Beirut und Stuttgart 2000.

46 Franke notes that as part of his doctoral dissertation which was on the subject of al-Khidr, he collected one hundred and fifty texts from various times and regions; See Franke, *Khidr in Istanbul*, 45; Cf. *Begegnung mit Khidr*.

47 *Ibid.*, 48.

48 *Ibid.*, 45.

mercy (*rahma*) and a reflection of divine light (*al-nūr*). Khidr's knowledge is primarily esoteric (*'ilm al-bāṭin*) and thus his being a conduit to divine knowledge can be viewed as his being a dispenser of divine light simultaneously, since God in Islam is both the "source of all knowledge" (*Al-'Alīm; Al-Khabīr*) as well as "source of esoteric light" (*Al-Nūr*). Khidr makes divine knowledge manifest for Moses in the Quranic episode and thus he brings him to "light," as it were, from being in the "dark" about the true reality of things and events.⁴⁹ It may be noted that Khidr's role as a prophet can be maintained within the classical understanding of Quranic interpretation and other religious literature, while his role as a revealer of "divine light" is mainly developed and continues in the Islamic mystical tradition.

V. Conclusion

Inasmuch as Khidr is seen as a repository of divine knowledge and the initiator of those who seek divine proximity, i.e., those who are on the path, it may be argued that Khidr functions as an illuminator of the souls, as it were. For these two are allegories that may be considered two sides of the same coin. As guardian of the symbolic lamps that illuminate every corner of the *qalb* (heart) of the seeker, Khidr remains a servant of God like every other human being. Khidr does the spiritual service for other seekers on behalf of God or by the leave of God, as noted by Sufis of all rank and every school, for the last thing they wish to do is to create an intermediary between a seeker and the divine that is not reconcilable with Islamic monotheism.

Another interesting dimension of Khidr is that he is a great leveler of rank, a remover of distinctions based on worldly privilege. While he bestows spiritual status or rank, he does so indiscriminately; thus he appears and helps all not just the *al-khāṣṣa* (the spiritual elite or the accomplished Sufis).⁵⁰ The elitist idea that gnosis can be achieved only by the elect is contrary to how Sufism is blended in Muslim life and religion in the Islamic world. Khidr as a popular figure can be said to be the most 'accessible saint' in universal Islam. His availability to one and all counters the claim that only the elect may know the divine or have the ability and the means to

49 The Quranic episode refers to Moses' encounter with Khidr as related in Q 18:65–82 where Moses experiences three acts by Khidr which Moses finds reprehensible in that they seem to violate the "law". Moses' objections thus compel Khidr to explain the hidden meanings or mystery behind each act which when seen in their entirety do not seem objectionable. The object of the story seems to be to convey the immensity of knowledge and the levels through which it is received from God. While Moses was given the shari'a or the law (exoteric knowledge), Khidr was endowed with 'ilm ladunnī or the knowledge of the unseen world (esoteric knowledge).

50 According to popular belief, Khidr appears to anyone who calls his name and seeks help from him. In mystical traditions such as that of the Uwaysis of Central Asia; he is the physically absent teacher of those who put their trust in him and are willing to toil on the path (see note 19 above).

seek *ma'ārifah*. Inasmuch as Khidr touches the lives of human beings, even if it is imaginary to the rationalist, he allows the common person to feel this direct relationship with the unseen and transcendent God, making this God immanent and active in their lives. This is the hope that religious beliefs ultimately are designed to deliver and in the story and symbolism of Khidr it seems this goal may have been achieved for many. Finally, miracles or *mu'jizāt* which come as a result of the knowledge of the unseen (*'ilm al-ghayb*) are not due to personal abilities but are granted by God; this is as true of Moses and other prophets as much as it is of Khidr. Even though in popular piety much good is often credited to his own doing, Khidr of the Qur'an operates like the Christ of the Qur'an in that the special acts they are able to perform are achieved by the leave of God. They are granted these powers in the moment of their execution by the grace of God so as to allow the dispensation of divine mercy through a medium which does not transgress the boundaries of orthodox Islam. Thus, just as Muhammad is said to have the power to mediate on behalf his followers on the day of judgment, the Khidr legend allows the same kind of mediation through Khidr with one key difference; it is imminently available to a sincere seeker. It must be noted, however, that in popular piety, many Muslims call on Prophet Muhammad for a variety of similar reasons, including honoring the Prophet with words of praise in order to seek God's blessings.

Rationalists often decry any claims of truth made on behalf of mystical traditions, regarding these as superstitions. However, many mystics thought of such knowledge as not only within the realm of certitude but as accompanied with a sort of "inner light" which is its own evidence.⁵¹ No outside evidence is sought or is seen as necessary because it is a subjective and experiential truth and no amount of reasoning against it would either be able to strengthen or weaken such claims. Thus, the two forms of "knowledge" seem to be on two different tracks, almost parallel to each other.⁵² Similarly one can see two parallel paths travelled by Khidr and Moses; the former is on the path of an *experience of being given* the knowledge instantaneously and immediately, while the latter is on the path of *witnessing to a revelatory event* which is comparable to the divine mandate received by other prophets such as Abraham, Noah, Jesus and Muhammad. Here, too, the dialectic is invoked between the orthodoxy of the path of Moses and the mystical sublimity of the path of Khidr.

51 It must be added that the proponents of this idea would acknowledge the need for necessary prerequisites for one to be able to perceive this inner experience or "light." William James would call this conditioning of the self, a realization of trust in God's presence resulting in an "unaccountable feeling of safety", in: *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, London 1905, 285.

52 This idea is drawn from Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, 114.

In these two figures, the law and the experience, the *zāhir* and the *bāṭin*, the hidden and the manifest are differentiated, or as one might argue, differentiated so as to show an even deeper course of their convergence.⁵³

53 This is indeed what many scholars and mystics hold to be true because they see mysticism as an integral part of their orthodox practice. In Islamic legalistic writings much has been made of the contrast between "law" and "experience" or the *sharī'ah* and the *ṭarīqah*; in fact they are two sides of the same coin. Law requires one to practice the faith diligently but the final aim remains the attainment of the love of God and the certainty (*al-yaqīn*) of the eternal life with God in the hereafter (*al-ākhirah*) while still in this world. Thus, both aspects of faith are necessary for complete realization of God.